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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 001691

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/21/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [BA](#) [POL](#) [REFORM](#) [OFFICIALS](#)  
SUBJECT: MINISTER OF STATE FOR CABINET AFFAIRS EXPLAINS  
ELECTION PREPARATIONS

REF: MANAMA 1625

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) The Ambassador September 19 met with Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Shaikh Ahmed bin Attiyatallah, who is responsible for carrying out many aspects of the upcoming parliamentary and municipal elections. Shaikh Ahmed said King Hamad would soon officially announce the dates of the two rounds of the elections, but he expected them to take place in late November and early December. The government will allow Internet e-voting for Bahraini citizens living outside the country, and inside Bahrain voters at some polling stations can choose between using traditional manual ballots or touch screen machines that produce a printed receipt. He stated that 100 civil society representatives would be issued passes to monitor elections at any of the 50 polling centers. Candidates and their staff as well as local and international media will be able to enter the centers, and webcams installed at the centers will broadcast directly onto the Internet. Shaikh Ahmed said the GOB would continue to work with the media to get its message out, but politicians were criticizing the government for political reasons. Separately, civil society representatives most concerned with election monitoring and transparency told EmbOffs they know nothing about the government's plans to enhance the elections' credibility. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador September 19 met with Shaikh Ahmed bin Attiyatallah Al Khalifa, who serves as Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, President of the Central Informatics Organization, and head of the Civil Service Bureau, and who has responsibility for implementing many aspects of the upcoming parliamentary and municipal elections. Shaikh Ahmed is also identified in a recently leaked report drafted by a former associate and head of the Gulf Center for Democratic Development as the ringleader of a complex conspiracy to influence the outcome of the elections (septel). Despite his credentials as a strong supporter of increased use of technology and his modern, moderate facade, he (and his brother President of the Royal Court Shaikh Mohammed bin Attiyatallah Al Khalifa) is widely viewed as a hardline defender of royal family power and prerogatives.

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Elections Late November/Early December  
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¶3. (C) Shaikh Ahmed told the Ambassador that the parliamentary and municipal elections would be held on the same days, with the first round taking place at the end of November and the second round (between the two highest

vote-getters in the first round) one week later in the beginning of December. He would not give the specific dates, saying that King Hamad would do so by the end of September or beginning of October, but noted that the dates could be determined by examining information in the voter rolls (which were released for public review September 21). A voter must be at least 20 years and one day of age to vote, he explained, and the voter rolls would not include anyone younger than this specific age. (Note: Newspapers report September 21 that total registered voters in Bahrain number 295,662, of them 148,344 are men while 147,318 are women.)

14. (C) Shaikh Ahmed said citizens had one week following the publication of the lists to register objections, with an additional three days for judges to rule on objections. The lists will be posted in central locations in each of the governorates and on a secure website, and a hotline will be available to answer any questions. The King will officially announce the election dates immediately after this 10-day period. Shaikh Ahmed noted that a few thousand citizens were removed from the voter lists because they are convicted drug addicts or criminals. None of those ineligible to vote were convicted of political crimes. In response to the Ambassador's question, Shaikh Ahmed said the 50 municipal constituencies that were created for the 2002 elections would decline to 40 to match the 2002 parliamentary constituencies, allowing both elections to be held on the same day.

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E-Voting Plan  
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15. (C) The Ambassador asked about the status of Bahrain's controversial plan to allow e-voting for the elections.

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Shaikh Ahmed said officials had met with representatives of all political societies to explain the government's plan to use e-voting. Although none objected during the meeting, some societies later criticized the plan in the newspapers in spite of the government's attempts to work with them on implementation. Shaikh Ahmed said that voters outside Bahrain who could not easily go to Bahraini Embassies, and who had pre-registered and received smart cards, would be able to vote through the Internet. The number of citizens able to vote through the Internet was capped at one percent of total votes cast outside the country.

16. (C) Inside Bahrain, there will be no Internet voting, Shaikh Ahmed said. Computer-based voting, however, would be offered at the ten "common" election centers to be established at high-traffic areas such as the Seef mall, airport, Bapco (petroleum company), Alba (aluminum plant), and exhibition center. Voters would be offered the choice of using a touch screen or conventional manual voting. In using the touch screen, voters would receive a paper receipt after making their selection, which they then must insert into a secure ballot box. E-voting will not be an option at the other 40 polling stations across the country, one in each constituency.

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Engagement With Political Societies  
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17. (C) To gain the buy-in of the political societies, Shaikh Ahmed said the government had offered to create a joint government/political society committee to implement the e-voting plan. The political societies would have the right to select the auditing firm that would oversee the process. The government had offered to set a limit on the maximum percentage of e-votes allowable - one percent, five percent, ten percent - in consultation with the societies. Thus far, the political societies had not responded to the government's offers.

¶8. (C) Shaikh Ahmed said the government would use e-voting in spite of some public criticisms because Bahrain is a pioneer in this area. Other Gulf states, including the UAE and Qatar, are interested in using e-voting and want to learn from Bahrain's experience. After all the efforts to engage political societies on e-voting, the government does not want to kill the plan just because of some complaints in the newspapers, he said.

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Need For Independent Monitors  
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¶9. (C) The Ambassador asked about the status of allowing election monitors to cover the voting, stressing that independent monitors enhance the credibility of the elections. Shaikh Ahmed said that judges would be responsible for carrying out the elections. In the 2002 elections, only two NGOs were allowed to visit polling stations as monitors. (Note: The Bahrain Human Rights Society and Bahrain Transparency Society.) This year the government would distribute 100 passes to NGO representatives to monitor the elections. Minister of Social Development Fatima Al Baloushi, he said, had written to all registered non-political NGOs to invite them to participate in the monitoring, including human rights and transparency groups.

¶10. (C) Those holding the passes will be able to enter any of the polling stations, Shaikh Ahmed said. These 100 cards are in addition to the two passes to be given to each candidate, one for the candidate and the other for a staffer. Three hundred members of the local media (print and broadcast) will also be permitted to enter the voting centers, as will international media representatives from outlets such as CNN, BBC, Al Jazira, and Al Arabiya. Finally, the government will install webcams in each polling center for live broadcast on the Internet.

¶11. (C) Shaikh Ahmed noted that the government was taking other steps to make sure the elections go smoothly. The ballot cards would contain anti-counterfeiting features, have an imbedded alarm that would sound if the cards were taken out of the polling centers, and display a printed serial number. When the polls close, the ballot boxes will be opened and the ballots counted in front of the candidates. The candidates will sign a statement that the count was done, and the statements and the ballots will be sealed with wax inside the boxes. The judges will then transport the boxes, along with a police escort, to the Ministry of Justice, where they will be received by another judge and stored inside a

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secure room until the end of the period for challenges.

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Public Outreach Lacking  
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¶12. (C) The Ambassador expressed surprise at the extensive efforts to allow election monitoring and ensure the integrity of the elections, indicating that the government had not done a good job of informing the public about its plans. He emphasized that the elections must be free and fair, and must be seen to be free and fair. He recommended the government redouble its efforts on outreach, commenting that the word is not getting out. (Note: Bahrain Transparency Society President Jassim Al Ajmi told Pol/Econ Chief September 19 that he was unaware of any GOB plans to allow election monitoring, though he was hopeful monitoring would be allowed. Bahrain Human Rights Society Vice President Abdullah Al Derazi told PolOff September 20 that he had heard rumors of a Ministry of Social Development (MSD) plan to form a committee to "follow up" on the elections, but it was unclear what this meant. He said there had been no direct contact from MSD.)

¶13. (C) Shaikh Ahmed told the Ambassador that the government had already held public affairs events on the elections and would continue to do so. It had hired a public relations firm to spread the word. He complained that despite the efforts, people did not want to hear the government's message. "We sat with the political societies, and they're comfortable with our strategy," he said. But they are playing a political game, and so they go public with their criticisms and accusations for political reasons. Shaikh Ahmed rejected the claims of the opposition, saying, "the whole world is watching us - we know this, we're not stupid." He pledged that the elections will be totally transparent.

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No Political Naturalization  
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¶14. (C) The Ambassador asked about rumors of "political" naturalization of Asian residents of Bahrain, which some say could influence the election outcome. Shaikh Ahmed dismissed these claims, saying the Interior Minister had stated publicly that 5,000 people had been naturalized over the last three years, all of whom met the legal criteria (reftel). If opposition groups want to criticize and investigate this issue, he said, they should participate in the elections and win seats in parliament. Then they will have the right to question government officials about policies with which they disagree. "This is democracy," he said.

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Comment  
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¶15. (C) If the elections come off as Shaikh Ahmed describes - with packs of election monitors and media covering every aspect, and redundancies built into the e-voting systems - the actual conduct of the elections will go well. What is worrying, however, is that the individuals and organizations most concerned with monitoring and transparency know nothing about the government's plans in this regard. With over two months left before the elections are expected to be held, there is plenty of time for the government to spread the word and engage with political actors of all stripes to enhance the elections' credibility and transparency. At this point, however, the government appears to be slow off the mark on engaging with political and civil societies on the elections.

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